

Vital improvements to one of Exeter's busiest commuter routes are due to start in mid-February. The 14-month scheme to widen Bridge Road in Exeter, developing two continuous outbound lanes from Countess Wear to the Matford roundabout.

The £13.45 million scheme will aim to tackle queuing and reduce journey times for all traffic, while at the same time improving links for pedestrians and cyclists.

In order to protect travelling motorists and provide safe working space for the site staff, traffic will be reduced to one lane in each direction.

The scheme involves:– Rotating the Swing Bridge by around a metre to change the angle of exit from the structure; Creation of a cantilevered pedestrian and cycle bridge along the upstream side of Countess Wear Bridge; Relocating the toucan crossing to the northern side of the canal; Improvements to the walking and cycling route along the full length; Reconstructing the junction of Countess Wear Road and Bridge Road to prevent traffic turning left off Bridge Road. I would suggest avoiding the area for 2016!

As I am sure you are aware the new 5.5km SDH opened to traffic in the early hours of Tuesday 15th December in a phased process. Early on Monday evening a temporary closure of Hamelin Way, Torquay took place which enabled the removal of the roundabout at Kerswell Gardens and a final section of white lining painted on the intersections.

Following this phase, project staff, the traffic management team and members of Devon and Cornwall Police travelled at a slow speed along the route, removing cones and barriers. Public vehicles were able to follow immediately afterwards, using the much anticipated South Devon Highway.

There will be some further work required to finish off the project, including landscaping and surfacing of local roads surrounding the new highway, which will continue into 2016. This may require side road closures or traffic lights for periods of time, but the public will be notified.

At a fractious County Council I asked why the Council was not joining the NHS in putting a cap of 55% above staff rates for the employment of Agency workers. This would mean that Agency workers were well rewarded for their work, County staffers would not feel undermined and it would help towards plugging the £12.4m funding gap in people services. Sadly the Council is not following this sensible decision – I suspect because we have very high value Managers who are employed on Agency contracts!

I also asked the Cabinet Member for Highways Management for a Report on the progress of the Parking on Pavements Bill which had sadly failed to go through the Commons the week before. This Bill sought to extend to English Local Authorities the same rights that pertain to London Authorities whereby Parking on pavements is not allowed unless the authority specifically allows it. I asked the Cabinet member to record on the Enforcement Officer's recording apparatus whether a car is parked on the pavement when a ticket has been issued. This data would help the DfT determine the extent of the problem. You will be aware that Devon's Enforcement Officers have no power to ticket vehicles just for parking on the pavement. Sadly he declined to agree to this simple and no cost change.

Finally you want to know about the Council's Budget settlement. Well I think it is a given that that the Council will be taking up the Government's offer of a 2% increase for Adult Social services and will be increasing by the 1.99% they are allowed – so expect 3.99% increase on your Council Tax for next year – however we will be fighting it out in the next few weeks as to where the cuts will fall –

certainly with a proposal to cut the budget by £19.8m on People's Services, most of which is coming from Adult Services we will be having some interesting meetings coming up.